Newsweek Leadership for the 21st Century

Ready for Action: Napolitano, with notes, prepares for her first meeting of the morning

Now This Is Woman's Work

There are more female governors in office than ever before, and they are making their mark with a pragmatic, postpartisan approach to solving state problems.

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Oct. 15, 2007 issue - In 1998, voters in a focus group were asked to close their eyes and imagine what a governor should look like. "They automatically pictured a man," says Barbara Lee, whose foundation promoting women's political advancement sponsored the survey. "The kind you see in those portraits hanging in statehouse hallways." They most certainly didn't visualize Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, a former beauty-pageant winner, avid hunter, snowmobiler and mother of four who was elected to her state's highest office last November. Or Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, a badge-wielding former federal prosecutor and onetime attorney for Anita Hill who has redefined the debate over illegal immigration in her state.

While this year's political buzz has been about Hillary Clinton's run for the White House and Nancy Pelosi's ascension to Speaker of the House, women leaders like Palin, a Republican, and Napolitano, a Democrat, have gained significant power in the lives of millions of Americans at the state level. In addition to Alaska and Arizona, Michigan, Kansas, Washington, Hawaii, Connecticut, Louisiana and Delaware elected or re-elected women governors in the last year. That's a total of nine, the highest number to serve simultaneously. And next year women

candidates will run for the statehouse in North Carolina and Indiana. A decade ago only 16 women in U.S. history had served as governor (four of them were appointed to replace their dead husbands or other ill-fated male predecessors). Today that number stands at 29. "The best way for people to believe in women as competent executives is by actually watching them govern," says Lee. "They find them likable, strong and effective."

New research shows that voters give female governors significantly higher marks than their male counterparts on such qualities as honesty, cooperation and caring—as well as toughness. And at a time when the national debate has become poisonously partisan, governors like Napolitano, 49, and Palin, 43, are making their mark with a pragmatic, postpartisan approach to solving problems, a style that works especially well with the large numbers of independent voters in their respective states.

Napolitano vetoed 127 bills proposed by Republican lawmakers during her first term. But she also went on to approve tax cuts opposed by some of her fellow Democrats while winning Republican support for her pet project, funding all-day kindergarten. She was the first governor of either party to demand that the federal government live up to its constitutional responsibility to secure her state's border with Mexico while at the same time fending off conservatives' efforts to deny social services to illegal immigrants. In 2006, President George W. Bush traveled to the Arizona border, where he publicly praised Napolitano's policies. She won re-election in a landslide, and in a state where Republicans still hold the majority. "Arizonans don't wake up saying, 'I'm a blue person' or 'I'm a red person'," Napolitano tells NEWSWEEK. "They wake up saying, 'How is the governor dealing with my freeway problem, my school problem, my whatever issue it is of the day?' "

In Alaska, Palin is challenging the dominant, sometimes corrupting, role of oil companies in the state's political culture. "The public has put a lot of faith in us," says Palin during a meeting with lawmakers in her downtown Anchorage office, where—as if to drive the point home—the giant letters on the side of the ConocoPhillips skyscraper fill an entire wall of windows. "They're saying, 'Here's your shot, clean it up'." For Palin, that has meant tackling the cozy relationship between the state's political elite and the energy industry that provides 85 percent of Alaska's tax revenues—and distancing herself from fellow Republicans, including the state's senior U.S. senator, Ted Stevens, whose home was recently searched by FBI agents looking for evidence in an ongoing corruption investigation. (Stevens has denied any wrongdoing.) But even as she tackles Big Oil's power, Palin has transformed her own family's connections to the industry into a political advantage. Her husband, Todd, is a longtime employee of BP, but, as Palin points out, the "First Dude" is a blue-collar "sloper," a fieldworker on the North Slope, a cherished occupation in the state. "He's not in London making the decisions whether to build a gas line."

In an interview with NEWSWEEK, Palin said it's time for Alaska to "grow up" and end its reliance on pork-barrel spending. Shortly after taking office, Palin canceled funding for the "Bridge to Nowhere," a $330 million project that Stevens helped champion in Congress. The bridge, which would have linked the town of Ketchikan to an island airport, had come to symbolize Alaska's dependence on federal handouts. Rather than relying on such largesse, says Palin, she wants to prove Alaska can pay its own way, developing its huge energy wealth in ways that are "politically and environmentally clean."

It's no coincidence that two of the nation's most popular women governors come from frontier states (Arizona and Alaska were the 48th and 49th, respectively, to join the Union) without established social orders that tend to block women from power. In Washington (the 42nd state), Gov. Christine Gregoire and both U.S. senators are women, a trifecta yet to be achieved by any other state. As women reach these top jobs, even more women enter the political pipeline. "When voters perceive things are bad, they expect a woman candidate to come in and create change," says Debbie Walsh of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Voters give them license not to fit the mold."

They also are willing to embrace women in nontraditional roles as protectors or enforcers of the public interest. Napolitano, like Gregoire and Gov. Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, served as her state's attorney general. Granholm and Gregoire made national reputations helping the states win a record $200 billion settlement against the tobacco industry in the 1990s. Napolitano prosecuted human-smuggling rings as a U.S. attorney in the Clinton administration, and as state attorney general sued long-distance provider Qwest for consumer fraud. "It's a very authentic role for women to do that kind of caretaking and say, 'I am going to look after your interests'," says Walsh. "What makes them formidable as candidates is experience as the chief law-enforcement officer for their state, a role that exudes strength. Which is always the question asked about a woman. 'Is she strong enough? Is she tough enough?' "

It's a question Napolitano doesn't bother with much anymore. Sitting in her Phoenix statehouse office, decorated with sports memorabilia, law-enforcement badges and the flags of Arizona National Guard units serving in Iraq, Napolitano is surrounded by a cluster of public-safety experts, reviewing preparations for next winter's Super Bowl, which will be played near Phoenix. "Who's in charge?" she demands, jabbing at an impossibly complex organizational chart listing dozens of law-enforcement agencies. "Who do I call if something goes wrong?" That practical approach has impressed lawmakers, even if they don't agree with her on the issues. "Her door is always open," says State Sen. Tom O'Halleran, a Republican, who has clashed with Napolitano over legislation but is also impressed by her negotiating skills. "She's not stuck to an ideology."

Although she has been in office less than a year, Palin, too, earns high marks from lawmakers on the other side of the aisle. During a debate earlier this year over a natural-gas bill, State Senate Minority Leader Beth Kerttula was astounded when she and another Democrat went to see the new governor to lay out their objections. "Not only did we get right in to see her," says Kerttula, "but she asked us back twice—we saw her three times in 10 hours, until we came up with a solution." Next week in Juneau, Alaska lawmakers will meet to overhaul the state's system for taxing oil companies—a task Palin says was tainted last year by an oil-industry lobbyist who pleaded guilty to bribing lawmakers. Kerttula doesn't expect to agree with the freshman governor on every step of the complex undertaking. But the minority leader looks forward to exploiting one backroom advantage she's long waited for. "I finally get to go to the restroom and talk business with the governor," she says. "The guys have been doing this for centuries." And who says that's not progress?

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